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Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: January 6, 1959

JAN 14 1959

SUBJECT: Mikoyan Visit, Berlin Problem,
German Confederation
Geneva Talks

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Fritz Erler, Member of the German Bundestag
Under Secretary Herter
Mr. Wilhelm G. Grewe, German Ambassador
Mr. Martin J. Hillenbrand, GER

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Mr. Erler began by saying he had obtained a good picture of the Mikoyan conversation with the Secretary from Mr. Murphy, whom he had seen just prior to his appointment with the Under Secretary. In response to a query as to Mikoyan's further plans, the Under Secretary said he planned to make a trip around the United States and would be back in Washington about January 19 or 20.

Mr. Erler said that he personally was more a believer in private diplomacy than in conferences with television. He felt it could only be useful if the contacts established with Mikoyan could be continued, and if they led to serious discussions. The Under Secretary noted that the difficulty with bilateral discussions is that they immediately arouse suspicion in other people's minds as to what we are doing behind their backs in the way of arriving at agreements. Mr. Erler referred to a conversation which he had had recently in Bonn with Ambassador Bruce, when he (Erler) had indicated his belief that the Soviets were interested in direct bilateral discussions with the United States. The Ambassador had likewise mentioned his fear that the Europeans, including the Germans, would be suspicious that such dealings were at the expense of Europe. Mr. Erler said his view was that the Germans must have more confidence in their Ally. After all, they have complete confidence in the United States in the military sphere; this should also apply to diplomacy. The essential thing was that there be a complete mutual exchange of information. The Federal Republic, likewise, has a channel to Moscow, and should also be expected to keep the United States fully informed. Mr. Erler said he was opposed to procedures which needlessly complicated the already over-organized machinery of diplomacy. It was well known that an elaborate machinery for policy formulation

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formulation existed in the United States as in other Western countries. The problem of coordination when fifteen countries were involved, as in NATO, inevitably resulted in frozen positions and left little scope for give and take. Therefore, he believed that political consultation within NATO should be limited to the broad outlines and not attempt to go into details.

The Under Secretary commented that, as far as the Soviets were concerned, only a few leaders could actually carry on meaningful political discussions. The Soviet Ambassadors, for example, were generally strictly limited as to their discretion. Khrushchev tended to keep things pretty close to himself. We assume, of course, that Mikoyan has a considerable amount of latitude. Mr. Erler referred to the story told by Senator Humphrey that, on Khrushchev's desk in the Kremlin, there are six buttons, two of them marked Mikoyan, one to reach him in his office and one in his home. Mr. Erler also told the story of how, when queried about his late working habits during the Stalin period, Mikoyan said that one reason he worked so late was that he had to spend so much time with Stalin. When asked what the two of them did together, he responded that they spent their time thinking of new ways of insulting the Russians.

In response to Mr. Erler's question as to what we now envisaged happening on the Berlin problem, the Under Secretary responded that firm predictions would be foolish at this time. To judge from a few externals, the Soviets appeared really to want to talk. They were apparently attempting to persuade us that we misunderstood their Berlin demands as an ultimatum. When Mr. Erler commented that therefore the wording of the Allied reply to the Soviet note of November 27 was well chosen, and asked what would be the topics of such talks, the Under Secretary said it would presumably be Berlin in the context of the German question. Mr. Erler asked whether the European security issue would arise. The Under Secretary said almost inevitably. The Soviets always talk in terms of some measure of disengagement. The nuclear rearmament of the Federal Republic was feared by the Soviets almost more than any other single thing. Mr. Erler said he agreed with the latter judgment, and added that in the period to come the West must carefully study what can be done in this field.

The Under Secretary said the picture was terribly confused as to how the Soviets, in terms of their own thinking, envisaged a confederation of East and West Germany taking place. When Potsdam was violated by the Soviets, the economic unity of the country was shattered. It was difficult to understand how they expected the two Germanies to hang together with two such differing systems. Mr. Erler said he could not accept the confederation concept in its literal form, since this would involve recognition of two or perhaps three separate regimes in Germany. The West must find out the real meaning of this concept. The term, itself, was not conclusive, since Switzerland, after all, was called the Swiss Confederation (Confederation Helvetica), and no one had any objections to a system of that kind for Germany. The forthcoming months will require much work on the part of the Western Powers. It was obvious that, if there were to be German reunification, everything in East Germany could not be uprooted overnight. There would have to be an acceptance of certain of the institutions which had grown up there. Ambassador Grewe noted that the German Government had already taken the position that it was ready to preserve the system in East Germany in some respects.

Mr. Erler

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Mr. Erler added that the essential principle was to assure that no internal changes would take place without the consent of the population freely expressed. The Under Secretary commented that these were obviously matters requiring much thought.

In response to Mr. Erler's query as to whether Mikoyan and the Secretary had discussed the Geneva talks, the Under Secretary noted that they had just been touched on. Mr. Erler said that his impression was that cessation of nuclear tests offers some hope for agreement in the next few months. He saw a great danger in the situation where many powers, including small irresponsible ones under dictators, might have possession of atomic weapons. The Under Secretary agreed that the prospect of fissionable materials in explosive form being scattered throughout the world was indeed a depressing one.

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